

Santa Maria (California) Collaborative Leadership Project
Future Search Conference Feb 10-12, 2010
Working Together to Build the Future We Want for our Young People
by Jacquie Shillis

Inspired by a group of concerned citizens and led by Daniel Holden of the Non-Profit Support Center, Future Search participants dedicated three days to confronting what a County Supervisor called the “number one issue of our community”—youth violence. Nine months in the planning, this community dialogue attracted 110 stakeholders.

The planning process for a Future Search conference is inherently an exercise in stakeholder participation. In Santa Maria’s case, Holden stretched that concept even further. He noticed early on that the planning group was having difficulty understanding the idea of a community dialogue. They had never done anything like this before. They were inviting the usual list of people routinely gathered for the usual kind of meeting—focused on problems. The city seemed divided along political, religious, race, class and ethnicity lines, like many cities are; the idea of inviting adversaries and enemies to the table in dialogue was a departure from the status quo.

The planning group asked for a “sampler,” a way to experience a taste of a community dialogue, so Holden designed a way for them to invite fence sitters and other potential participants to have a dialogue addressing the past, present and future in three hours. As part of the exercise, he asked people to speak from the perspective of someone in a stakeholder group other than their own. For example, a police officer spoke as a parent and the district attorney stepped into the role of a gang member. Holden noted, “This experience alone was moving and meaningful. A police officer said if the community did nothing more than this, it would be worth it.”

Once the planning process took off, multiple meetings focused on identifying specific individuals to invite from a broad cross section of people, organizations and businesses involved with youth. Ultimately, the planning group invited members of the community from the following stakeholder groups:

- Criminal Justice
- Education
- Faith Based
- Families
- Government
- Health Care
- Law Enforcement
- Non Profits
- Youth

Within those broad categories, a diverse group was invited. High school students, public attorneys, small business owners, executive directors and staff of non-profit organizations, police chiefs and front-line officers, moms, dads, radio talk show hosts, educators, parole and probation officers, and former gang members were represented.

Holden tapped Mike Cordero, a local city councilman with 39 years of experience in law

enforcement, 36 of them in Santa Maria, to be co-facilitator. He wanted someone from Santa Maria with a lot of integrity, someone people would trust. Cordero was already a member of the planning group and came highly recommended by others in the group.

Moving from a list of potential stakeholders to a commitment to attend is a critical point for every Future Search planning group. Cordero's contention that Santa Maria did a good job getting the stakeholders to the conference is supported by the large number of attendees. How did they do it? Each member of the planning group was responsible for calling to invite people. "We insisted that if stakeholders really wanted the benefit, they needed to attend all three days. People dying in our community were worth three days."

Cordero worried, however, about the list of invitees. "It looked like we were inviting all shakers and movers—all quarterbacks. I wasn't sure that would work, but in the end it worked just fine. The list of invitees also included people we knew had some tense relationships. That worked well too. No past issues came up during the meeting."

Holden gives the planning group credit for getting the whole system in the room, and for ensuring that stakeholders took ownership and demonstrated leadership.

As the conference kicked off, Cordero had concerns that the process was too elementary for the adults. He worried that putting people into small circles and drawing things on the wall was kids' stuff. But it did not take long for him to learn he had misjudged. Participants not only accepted the process; the papers on the wall became very important.

On the first day, the youth challenged the intentions of the adults, suggesting the conference was a farce and nothing would come of it. Holden encouraged them to stay in the conversation. Cordero pointed to a strategic decision made by the planning group that may have helped keep the youth in the room. "We had decided to ask people to leave their titles in the hallways. We asked them not to wear uniforms, ties or anything that might be seen as a status symbol. We wanted all the people in the room to get as close to the same level as possible."

By the end of Day One, the youth let their guard down and as the conference went on, their participation increased. For example, some gave report outs for their small group. One highlight came on the afternoon of the second day when two of the young people put together a rap song involving all conference participants. "It brought all of us to our feet in a spontaneous round of applause!" Holden said.

Holden and Cordero agreed that the planning group made one major mistake, which came to light on the first day. One of the participants pointed out to the whole group that there was a couple in the room who did not speak English and asserted nothing had been done to address that. He then suggested the wrong people had been invited. There was already tension in the room and his comments increased it. Cordero was concerned. "People felt they had come to the conference to help, not to be beaten down. I was afraid if one person walked out, 15 others would too. It was a very critical time." Holden describes what happened next: "We invented a way to translate on the spot. People stepped up to help at table groups, while Hilda Zacharias, another city council person, translated my own and Cordero's comments from the front of the room. Some groups even chose to report out in Spanish and we had English translators for the large group! When this took place I knew we had turned the corner."

On the second day, the group began building a shared vision by cutting strips of paper with their ideas and taping them on the gymnasium wall in a way that brought coherence, order and structure to their vision. To Holden, their passion and attention to detail was a thing of beauty. “The whole process was an extraordinary thing to watch.”

Cordero’s general take on the process was more playful. “The process was well organized,” he commented, “but I would say it was organized chaos!”

By the end of the conference, stakeholders had developed seven strategies encompassing areas of the community that impacted youth violence:

- Education/Awareness/Leadership Development Strategies
- Community and Culture Media Strategies
- Youth, Families, and Neighborhood Resource Strategies
- Maldonado Youth Center Utilization Strategies
- Restorative Justice and Inclusion Strategies
- Business Opportunities and Partnership Strategies.
- Government and Public Policy Strategies

As facilitator, Holden was very pleased with the outcomes, with the quality, creativity and innovation demonstrated by the group. “They learned that people have similar passions. They found out there is already a lot going on, but it is not coordinated and sometimes people are working at cross purposes. Much of what they want to do now won’t cost a dime but will make a big difference.”

Holden was also impressed that lack of or too much law enforcement was not discussed as a root cause of youth violence. Nor was increased law enforcement included as one of the final strategies. “That was beautiful,” he says, “There is a tendency, when faced with unrelenting problems, fear, confusion, and uncertainty to go to ‘more control’ as a strategy. Instead, this group went for more engagement, more inclusion, and more dialogue as strategic directions. When it was over I pointed to the walls and said, ‘This is the first look at your future. Take a good look at it. It’s a little ragged, hard to read in places, not lined up perfectly, but it is the first real glimpse of your vision. When people ask you what happened here five years from now, remember this day.’”

Cordero has now taken off his facilitator hat and stepped back into the role of community member, helping to move plans into reality. Two months after the conclusion of the conference, stakeholders continue to work in seven action teams to create a different future for youth and their families. Cordero is hopeful about turning the broad plans from the conference into more detailed action plans. He is particularly encouraged because in many cases all the community has to do is use existing resources. “Everyone came out of the conference super energized,” he laughs. “The challenge now is keeping that energy going.”

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